

THE MONGOLIAN BUDDHIST CHURCH AND ITS ROLE IN TODAY'S MONGOLIAN SOCIETY

The role of the Buddhist Church in Mongolian history was interpreted in many ways by many authors. A general point of view is that the Manchus wanted the Mongols to become pacifistic (1 lama, minus 1 armed man). There were some authors who considered the spreading of Tibetan Buddhism harmful and destructive.

Personally, I have a different point of view. It is well known, that Mongolians already got acquainted with Buddhism, through Tibet during the 13th century. In the Yuan-era Buddhism reached its peak, but in spite of this, it still had no political role. Buddhism was accepted because of the Empire's tolerance towards religions. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Phagpa lama (Tib. 'gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags pa, 1235-1280) had an important role in the court as the leader of the *Sakyapa* (Tib. *sa skya pa*) order; he obtained control over Tibet.

Buddhism hasn't disappeared even in the "dark period" (14th-16th centuries) after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty, but at the time of the second conversion, Altan xan entered into an alliance with the *Gelugpa* (Tib. *dge lugs pa*) sect with definite purpose. He wanted to legitimize his rule over each and every Mongol. Thus, Buddhism was imposed on the Mongols by their own leaders. They deliberately chose Tibetan Buddhism; because it was in no way Chinese and the Tibetan monks could help them in the governmental administration.

The Manchu period brought with it the recruitment of the Buddhist Church. The system of the Mongolian monasteries worked as a Mongolian government in spite of the Manchu state in this period, and the head lamas of the Mongolian Buddhist Church - mainly the first and the second - played a very important role in Khalkha Mongolian society. After the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, the Eighth *Bogd Gegēn*, the head lama of the Mongolian Buddhist Church became the khan (Khalkha *xān*) of the Mongolian State. Nowadays, some historians are considering him as the leader of the last independent Mongolian state.

Öndör Gegēn, the first head lama of the Mongolian Church is just as important a figure of Mongolian history as Genghis was. After the political transformation, with the flourishing of Buddhism his role became very important again. It can be safely stated, that with his work he created the bases of the authority of Mongolian heads of Church and the survival of traditional Mongolian culture in the Manchu period.

Janabazar, who is known as the founder of the Mongol Buddhist Church, was an active participant of the events in the early Manchu era. He, besides spreading Buddhism, made indisputable steps in order to conserve Mongol traditions and with their help protect cultural and social integrity. From the second part of the 17th century, the foundation of the Church gave an opportunity for the Mongols to preserve their cultural identity even during the Manchu occupation despite the unifying efforts of the Empire, and later it became an indispensable condition of their political independence,

too. His innovations played an important role in the everyday life of the Mongols and nowadays can be considered as tradition in the resurrection of Mongolian Buddhism.

THE NATIONAL IDEA AND THE NEW ROLE OF THE CHURCH

One of the reasons for the spectacular victory of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP, Khalkha: Mongol Ardīn Xuw'sgalt Nam) in 2000 was that the coalition winning the 1996 elections proved unable to consolidate its power and to stabilise the economy. Apart from the reasons already mentioned, such as the government lacking a unified concept, a line of various confused measures, the worsening general situation in the economy, raging corruption and the murder of a leading opposition politician, one more crucial factor played a part. The Mongolian political transition, but even more the twenty year period that has gone by since then, had this curious trait that the symbols of the Mongolian nationalist sentiment that found its way to the surface at the time of the transition were adopted, on the level of rhetoric, by the former communist party instead of the earlier opposition. This granted the successor party an advantage in communication which they have capitalised on very successfully to this day. According to the ideology of the Soviet era, it was not permitted to represent the great Mongolian empire and its founder, Genghis Khan, as symbols of independent Mongolian statehood, independence or power in any emphatic political context. Censorship did all within its power to eradicate the undesirable political echoes of these symbols and ideas. After the transition, Genghis Khan came to occupy the place he deserved in the country's political pantheon as founder of the country and the empire, and head of the Mongolians who ruled the world. His person has gained a special role in nationalist rhetoric, too, and has become an important symbol of Mongolian national identity – a symbol which, incidentally, functions as a clear trademark of considerable marketing value all over the world. Impersonating the great state founding khan and the symbols of the great Mongolian Empire has secured an unbeatable communicational asset for the Mongolian successor party which was still championing the idea of internationalism not long ago. The question of religion, an issue of massive significance in the eye-of society, has led to a similar result.

In the early years of the democratic transition, the position of the Buddhist church and the freedom of religion were cardinal components in the communication of the opposition. The darkest period of the socialist era was the time of religious persecution carried out in order to establish and stabilise the power of the communist party. The anti-clerical and anti-religious measures of the second half of the 1930s culminated in the pogroms of 1937, when monasteries were destroyed and thousands of lamas were killed. Posterity might feel easier if they can blame these monstrosities on the Russian Bolsheviks but it is a fact that the 'courageous deeds of Mongolian patriots' were only assisted by guidance and advice from the Soviet friends.

In the era of the single party system, they successfully kept the church in a near-dead condition, but the political transition was followed by a period of explosive change. Old monasteries opened one after the other, and the number of lamas is still on the increase. This obviously goes back to Mongolian traditions as well as historical

causes. In today's Mongolia, young people often choose the life of a lama only to secure a living, as a kind of 'job.'

The majority of Mongolia's population still consider themselves Buddhists; this may be considered the state religion of this country and one of the central elements of Mongolian identity. The Mongolian successor state managed to create a harmonious relationship with the church and it has definitely escaped the stamp of being anti-clerical.

STATUS OF MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM NOWADAYS

Though the *Gelugpa*'s hegemony is typical, there are several working monasteries, which are connected to the old order, like *Sakyapa* Erdene jū, or the *Nyingmapa* (Tib. *rnying ma pa*) Narxaǰid xǎd in the capital city, or the newly rebuilt Xamarīn xǎd in the Gobi.

At the same time, some other institutions were also established, which were not characteristic for Mongolian Buddhism, for example meditation centres, organized upon the model of western civilizations. In our days, most of the foreign relations of the Mongolian Buddhist Church is connected to western Buddhist centres, like centres in Europe, the USA, or Canada.

As a result of these collaborations, the Buddhist Church not only has financial support, but gains knowledge about the institutional system organized around Buddhism in the Western part of the world. In the present days, foreign connections are getting more and more important. There are well known examples that Japanese, South-Korean, and Western (mainly North-American, but European as well) communities are supporting some of the Mongolian Buddhist monasteries or communities. In this sense, we can talk about cultural interaction.

The amount of monasteries using the Mongolian language is infinitesimal. We can hardly find monasteries in the capital city or in the countryside where Mongolian manuscripts or xylographs are kept at all. The lamas are usually not using, but only guarding them. There's only one Buddhist temple in the capital city which uses texts in Mongolian. Usually, when we are asking about the reason for this, the common answer is that the lamas are studying in Tibetan schools nowadays.

THE ECCLESIAL EDUCATION

At the beginning of the 1990s, there were still those lamas living who were not prey to bloodshed. However, in our days, there are just a few well-trained lamas and even they have not learnt in Mongolian schools either.

There has not worked an optimal educational system before, so most of the monasteries are led by lamas who do not possess eligible qualification to a position like this. This situation is characteristic mostly in the countryside and it is partly the cause of the desolation of monasteries. The young lamas usually go to the capital city to study, but they often do not return back to the countryside.

After the transition, the ecclesiastical education had to be reorganized. In our days, there are two systems working in Mongolia.

The western model

The centre of the Western system is the College of Religious Sciences, founded in 1970 at the Gandan monastery in Ulānbātar. It gives a BA (bachelor) degree for the students. It is typical that students who get a higher degree travel to foreign Buddhist centres, usually to India, Dharamsala, or go to the National University of Mongolia to get an MA degree, and some to have PhD. So after an ecclesiastic education, they usually get a higher degree in a secular institution.

The Mongolian Traditional model

The emphasis here is placed on the traditional learning process, lasting for 15 years. The lamas we asked were usually considering this process to be normative, though at the beginning of the last decade there were still a few lamas who could take part in such an education. This form of education was revived only a few years ago and the centres of these educational units are the *dacans*. In the Gandantegčēnlin monastery, there are three monastic schools.

1. Idgāčoijinlin dacan. It was originally founded in 1911, when the Theocratic Mongolian State was formed. The founder of the *dacan* was the Eighth *Bogd Gegēn*. This is a school of Buddhist philosophy, which concentrates exclusively on this discipline. The students are usually continuing their studies at Sera monastery after finishing this school.

2. Güngāčoilin dacan. It was founded in 1809. In 2008, the head of the monastery was Master Gundsambū who has learnt in Dharamsala. He and the *dacan* have important connections with the centre of Tibetan emigrants.

3. Daščoimpel dacan. It was founded in-1736. It was re-established in the year of the transition, in 1990. It is led by masters who studied in the South-Indian Gomang dacan. After the political transition in Mongolia, a new opportunity for candidates to get *gawj* (Mong. *γabju*, *γabji*, Tib. *dka' bcu*) degree opened here.

Besides these, belonging to the Gandan monastery the *Janraiseg*, *Düinxor*, *Badmayoga* and *Ĵūd* tantric school and medical center (mamba) (*dacan*) can be found.

In the capital city, there are traditional schools where education starts at age 5. This kind of school was founded for example in the Jūn xūrē Daščoilin monastery, which is the second biggest institution of the Mongolian capital city after the Gandan.

From 2008, a new main change was generated by the Gandan monastery. This is the Nalandarīn University supported by the 14th Dalai Lama.

Nowadays, hundreds of Mongolian lamas are studying in India per year, mainly in the centres of the emigrant Tibetans. One of the most important relationships of the Mongolians is the Namgyal logical school working besides the 14th Dalai Lama. The students from the Kālacakra dacan are studying in the educational centre in Dharamsala, while the other main school of the Mongolian lamas is the Drepung Gomang monastery in Mundgod South India.

In my opinion, besides the Tibetan based education, there is another reason why the Mongolian lamas are not using Mongolian texts in the sacral rites. One of the bases of tantric Buddhism is the initiation. By using the Tibetan language, the lamas (the initiates) are trying to keep out the believers from the knowledge. Nowadays, the reading of the classical Mongolian texts does not mean a problem for the believers, but it did in the 16-17th centuries when the most sacred texts were translated. At that time, the aim was to acquaint the religion. Today, it is more important that those not initiated should not be able to use these texts. By using the Tibetan language, it can be achieved that only the lamas be the ones who know the exact order of the rites, and the believers could take part in the rites only as much as it is necessary.

Nowadays, the state's role in the life of the Church has totally changed. The Buddhist Church hasn't got any financial support from the government; what is more, the government taxes the monasteries and even the benefactions offered for the church. In present days, a monastery usually works as an enterprise. The state considers the benefactions as an income. The *xamba lam* (head lama, abbot) of the monastery has to give a payment to the lamas, from which they have to pay taxes later.

On the other hand Erdene jū (founded by Abatai xan in 1585), which was the first among Mongolia's biggest monasteries, is not the Church's property. Nowadays, a temple with less than ten lamas operates there. The partly rebuilt monastery nowadays works as a museum. The same is true about the Amarbayasgalant monastery, which is also a beloved target of the tourists, and also one of the most important pilgrimage locations of Mongolian Buddhists.

Bakula Rinpoche, who was the Indian ambassador of Mongolia from 1989 to 2000 was one of the leading figures of the resuscitation of the *Gelugpa* tradition. The monastery founded by him is one of the important centres of the religious life of the capital city and the base of the foreign connections of the Mongolian Buddhist Church.

There is another important question which is connected to the head of the Church. The Ninth *Bogd Gegēn* was enthroned as the head of the Mongolian Buddhist Church in 2011, but his person has divided up Mongolian society. He was a Tibetan lama who was born in Tibet in 1932, and in 1991 for the request of the new Mongolian government the 14th Dalai Lama issued a petition that stated that he recognized the new incarnation of the Mongolian head lama.

The Ninth *Bogd Gegēn* died on 1st March 2012, and the Mongolian believers are now waiting for the appointment of a new incarnation.

BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY MONGOLIAN SOCIETY

The effect of the religious lifestyle can be detected in the everyday life, even if someone does not live totally according to the order of the religion. Lay people realize the rules of Buddhism and its philosophical interpretations in the simplest ways which means that the traditional rules are getting to decline.

The Tibetan originated Mongolian Buddhism is following the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism's tantric branch. The believers are usually practicing donation, good work and virtuous ways of life. Donation was general in Mongolian Buddhism

and it is still that nowadays. Believers usually give donations for rebuilding monasteries, temples, and for provisions for the lamas.

Nowadays, people from the richer level of society are donating a great amount of money and taking the role that administration had in the earlier centuries. This is evidenced by the recently fashionable trend to build stupas. There are special enterprises organized for this purpose, as the great amount of orders ensuring a safe living.

Traditional practices of lamas like fortune telling have appeared again. Forecasting became generally accepted and it can be practiced without any main restrictions, so it provides a lot of lamas a good livelihood. It has become a part of the urban people's life. In Ulānbātar, around the monasteries there can be found lamas providing fortune telling services to anyone who pays for it. So it is a little bit like a mini market.

This obviously goes back to Mongolian traditions as well as historical causes. In today's Mongolia, young people often choose the life of a lama only to secure a living, as a kind of 'job.'

It is a definitely new development that the believers are founding social organizations. These organizations are outside the Church, but in cooperation with it are doing a great amount of work. They are having excellent foreign connections; their aim is the spreading and acquainting of Mongolian Buddhism. A good example was in 2004 the establishment of the Jebtsundampa Center with the support of his Majesty the Ninth *Bogd gegēn*.

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